

Wakatobi

By Michael Wicks

I chose the title more for its oxymoronic inference than any other reason. For in truth the chances that you will see at least one Pygmy per day are almost as high as seeing clown fish. As a dive guide told me at one point over a pint of Bing Tang, “Mate, everyone comes here looking for THE Pygmy shot but there’s so much more here.” And he was so right.

We really did see seahorses almost every day. Some pregnant, some more colorful than others but the real draw to Wakatobi is what it’s known for; the ever reaching spectacular coral reefs. You will start around 6:30 in the morning in order to give enough time for breakfast before your first dive briefing; some of us were already up at 5:30 downloading pictures from our memory cards to prepare for the day. It may sound early but since 9 PM is Wakatobi midnight it’s not too grueling. Most everyone is in their bungalows by 9 and asleep not to long afterwards. Some divers will tend to stay a bit longer at the Bar on the Jetty some nights. But for the most part it was lights out at 9.

A dive guide from your boat will



give the ever so brief dive briefing and then you’re off to the boat. The local crew not only takes care of your every need, including carrying your camera gear to the boat, but if they hear your name just once they will commit it to memory. Each boat has 2 dive guides, one captain and local crew that insist on swapping your tanks, assist in donning your gear and will bring you water, cookies and sandwiches after each dive. In fact, unless you do a house reef dive, you won’t touch your 1st stage after your very first dive. There are only 12 divers per boat (not including any snorkelers) with the ratio of guide to diver kept at 1:6. This leaves ample room to move about on the boat as well as aiding in keeping the under water space from getting too cramped. All the dive boats venture off to different dive sites

also alleviating any congestion under water.

The dive guides you have on the first day will be the same dive guides you’ll have for the rest of the trip. Sometimes there will be a substitution. As in our case management felt that they had to give Alex and Ramone, our guides, a day off. Roel was our pinch hitting diver on those days. All three dive guides were superb in pointing out all the critters, large and small. It’s always worth taking a moment to alert your guide as to what your plan on doing with regards to your shooting. If you tell him or her you want to hang back after each sighting and wait for others to view, he’ll understand and will give you your time and space whilst leading others to the next attraction.

A standard dive day will consist



Reef and Diver

Canon Rebel xTi, Ikelite housing, 17mm EF17-85 IS USM, DS51 single Strobe, 1/100, F5.6, ISO 400





Clown Fish

Canon Rebel xTi, Ikelite housing, 100mm macro, DS51 single Strobe, 1/125, F2.8, ISO 200

of 2 dives in the morning, a break for lunch and then one dive in the afternoon. Although this doesn't sound like a lot of dives, each dive lasted on average 55-60 minutes with some breaking the 70 minute mark. You'll do all your safety stops whilst still viewing creatures and critters as well as the reef. It really doesn't get much better than that. After returning from the 3rd dive you're free to do a twilight dive. Wakatobi's security constantly monitors the house reef from about 7 in the morning to about 7 at night helping to keep you safe and secure whilst in the water. The local crew will assist you with getting your gear and you out to the beach. From there you can either take a water taxi or just swim out to the house reef. The house reef starts less than 50' from shore. None of the reviews come close to truly portraying its incredible beauty. Spotted Rays, brilliant coral, and clown fish abound right under the Jetty as does the house octopus. He



Pygmy Seahorse

Canon Rebel xTi, Ikelite housing, 100mm macro, DS51 single Strobe, 1/125, F2.8, ISO 200

must like the music from the Bar as he's made it his home. If you time it right you can ascend right next to the bartender and he'll have your drink waiting for you.

Every one gets one night dive. On that day you'll skip your afternoon dive from the boat. Some will go for a dive on the house reef, take out the kayaks, snorkel, or take in a massage. You won't go wrong with any of these choices. Fair warning, however, as there are "massage miser" out there who will sign up for massages every day within



Crocodile Fish

Canon Rebel xTi, Ikelite housing, 100mm macro, DS51 single Strobe, 1/200, F3.2, ISO 200

the moments of arriving on the island. So sign up quickly.

Waktobi Dive sites include Nunia Danir, Pastel, "38", Pinacles, Table Coral, Spiral Corner, Pockets, and Cornucopia to name a few. One of my



Rock Fish

Canon Rebel xTi, Ikelite housing, 78mm EF17-85 IS USM, DS51 single Strobe, 1/160, F5.6, ISO 200

favorites, though, was Sandy Chute. On this dive you'll descend down to a sandy bottom where you'll see eels, lion fish, puffers, flounders, sea moths. I was mesmerized by the sea moth's behavior. I could barely tear my eyes away from them until I saw a classic cleaning station. The scene was right out of Pixar's "A Shark Tale." A lion fish swam in one side where a dozen or so cleaner shrimp went to work on him. Afterwards he swam out making room for the next customer.

Many of the dives are drift dives. There are no rides at Disneyland that can rival drift diving along Wakatobi's reefs at a leisurely rate of 2-3 knots. In many cases the current changes so dramatically, as if sensing our dive was half over, it reversed itself and swept us back to where we inserted.

Two groups not more than 50' away from each other will see completely different life forms on the exact same dive. There would be a lot of ooh'ing and ah'ing during our



Reef and Diver

Canon Rebel xTi, Ikelite housing, 17mm EF17-85 IS USM, DS51 single Strobe, 1/100, F5.6, ISO 400

surface intervals as we all compared and contrasted our pictures showing others what we saw that they didn't and vice versa.

I was finally able to get a decent, useable shot on the last dive of my last day at a site called Pockets. We saw 4 sea horses, but I concentrated on the first one. A little too much I think, as I went in to deco mode whilst shooting. I ascended to 20' and continued on to catch up with the group. Ramone, our dive guide, motioned for me to

come back down to about 40' to see something. Knowing that my deco time was ever increasing, I made it a quick descent to view. It was worth it as I was able to see the pregnant seahorse. It was just so "tedious" ascending to my deco stop depths, having to swim around for an extra 15 minutes viewing more and more brilliant coral colors and lion fish than one should be allowed to see at one time.

The group I was traveling set many firsts at Wakatobi. Probably the most prolific being the first group to have a member fall off the Jetty Bar. The Jetty Bar is the happy hour place to be. Well truth be told, it's the only place to be if you're not diving or eating. If you time it right you can surface at the bar after the house reef dive and the bartender will have your drink waiting for you.

I would be quite remiss if I didn't comment on the dive staff and local workers. The guides hailed from all over the world. We were surrounded by Kiwis, Aussies, Brits, Austrians and Belgium to name a few. Our dive guides, Alex, Ramone, and Roel were not only extremely knowledgeable, but also extremely patient with us photographers, and more than willing to listen to our needs. Wendy, our hostess extraordinaire and organizer, made sure we were all content and saw to our every need on land. The



local crew was amazing as well. All are learning English and always with a smile on their faces.

The food was amazing and bountiful. Although I personally didn't gain weight, it was extremely easy to do so. The menu for lunch and dinner was ever changing. One afternoon I saw a local man carrying 2 huge Tuna's. When I asked one of the dive guides about it, his eyes lit up and he beamed "Mmm. Looks like Tuna Sashimi tonight." It was THE freshest sashimi I've had in a long time. There really is something on the menu for everyone. Should you decide that you want to dine outside, there are a few tables alongside the dining building, and Wendy won't hesitate to bring out candles and place settings to complete the outdoor ambiance.

On your last day you'll dive in the morning. Then in the afternoon you'll have the opportunity to visit the village on the other side of the island. Bring some rupees (the locals don't take other currency) if you want to buy hand made sarongs. But prepare yourself as this villiage is just emerging from what can only be classified as 3rd world status. Wakatobi Dive resort is doing their best to help them by providing electricity, education, arranging



for medical care and helping to build new houses and schools. It was an incredible experience though and all the villagers were kind and the children love posing for pictures and following you around to talk and describe things.

It would be extremely difficult to find anything negative about the resort or the people in Wakatobi. The camera room is not only set up perfectly for many shooters but it's also the coldest room on the island. They also have a lounge with one computer that has internet access and wifi in the long house. But the internet is very slow and sometimes doesn't work so don't stress over not getting that email out. Some other things should be noted before you go. 1) 110-120 is only available in the Camera room I highly

recommend bringing along adapters so you can charge your iPod and batteries in your room. 2) If you do charge batteries in the Camera Room plan on it taking about 24 hours and for your batteries to get extremely hot. 3) This is a resort BUT the air conditioning is just enough to make it manageably at night to sleep. As our organizer Wendy stated "it's good but it's not American industrial strength A/C." I found that by true midnight it was quite pleasant in our bungalow. 4) Nitrox is available but it's kind of expensive. I originally signed up but then decided not too go that route and I was one of the divers staying up past Wakatobi midnight.

Over all Wakatobi is a definite must visit resort. The staff, the service, and the diving is top notch and worth all the hours in the air to get there.

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